

SELECTING COUNTER TOPS

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Most houses today provide built-in work surfaces in at least one room. These include kitchen counters, planning and study centers, bathroom counters and utility counters.

Material Selection

The finishing material must fulfill a variety of requirements. The surface must be resistant to excessive moisture, heat, cold, alkalies, acids and medicines. Strong impacts, excessive cutting and chopping, various abrasives and sunlight require a versatile counter top. The material should be reasonably priced and easy to install.

Color and pattern are important considerations. Color reflecting light without creating glare and having little color contrast from the surrounding surfaces is less likely to cause visual fatigue. Plain color will provide a more relaxed atmosphere than repetition or addition of patterns in a room. Unemphatic texture or design has proven easy on the eyes and shows less wear.

There is no material on the market which meets all the required qualifications, but many are satisfactory if proper use and care are given.

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When a material is made in both squares or sheets, the latter is preferred since there are fewer joints required.

Counter Parts and Requirements

Backing is needed on materials which are not self-supporting. Exterior grade $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood or $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch water-repellent particle board usually is used. A water-repellent backing is required.

Joints are not desirable on counter surfaces, but when the counter requires joining, the butt joint between the two sheets should be tight so no food and moisture can creep into crevices. Avoid joining with divider strips as they make cleaning difficult.

Backsplashes keep the wall behind the counter clean. Concave-shaped backsplashes are better than those joined by metal stripping. Flexible materials excellent for concave backsplashes would be linoleum, vinyl and some polyester laminates. For ease of cleaning, backsplashes should extend to the base of the wall cupboard, rather than ending 4 or 5 inches up the wall.

Edgings of the material selected for the counter are more satisfactory than stainless steel or chromium-plated metal. Avoid the latter two materials when possible, unless the counter top is stainless steel.

References

Small Homes Council. "Counter Surfaces — F9.1"; Mumford House, University of Illinois; Urbana, Illinois.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. "Planning the Kitchen and Workroom"; Home and Garden Bulletin, No. 12.

Agricultural Extension Service. University of Arkansas. "Counter Tops"; Leaflet 448. April, 1970.

Material	Advantages	Disadvantages	Care
Linoleum	Very resilient. Deadens sound in kitchen. Durable (dents, cuts and scratches tend to heal). Does not break. Flexible for installing over edges and backsplashes. Available in various colors and designs. Economical in price. Nonconductor of electricity.	Shows stains; waxing helps resist stains. Alkali makes linoleum porous and brittle so a minimum of detergent should be used. Mildew and rot result from excessive exposure to water (i.e. near faucets). Sensitive to heat and light; colors lighten and show heat rings; shows scorch.	Wipe with damp cloth. Clean with a mild soap. Rinse and dry. Keep waxed with a light coat of self-polishing wax. Do not use as cutting surface. Use protector pads for hot pans.
Marble	Provides hard, durable, moisture-proof surface. Is easily cleaned. Resistant to heat and sunlight. Scratch and sun resistant.	Noisy and non-resilient. Breakable objects may be damaged if dropped. Dulls knives. Requires sturdy support. High initial cost.	Wash with warm water and mild soap. Rinse and dry with soft cloth.
Plastics— Laminated: Melamine (high-pressure)	Provides hard, durable, smooth and tough surface. Cleans easily. Resists fading, abrasion, moisture, stains and household chemicals. Available in various colors and patterns. Nonconductor of electricity.	High temperatures, such as 420 F., affect the color. Shows cutting and slicing. Dents and cracks under heavy impact. Sunlight can change color.	Wash with mild soap and water. Rinse and dry. Use protector pads under hot pans. Abrasives will scratch the surface. Some stains can be removed with diluted household bleach.
Plastics— Laminated: Polyester (low-pressure)	Properties similar to high-pressure laminates except low-pressure laminates are not as durable. Costs less than high-pressure laminates.	More susceptible to heat, abrasion and scratching than high-pressure laminates. Damaged by burning cigarettes. Other disadvantages like high-pressure laminates.	Same as for high-pressure laminates.
Plastics— Vinyl	Deadens sound in kitchen. Resistant to fading, most stains, chemicals, moisture and abrasives. Cuts can be sealed. Not damaged by heavy impact. Flexible for installation over edges and backsplashes. Costs less than high-pressure laminates.	Sunlight affects color. Strong alkalis, acids, dyes and boiling water standing on the surface discolors some types. Highly susceptible to heat. It cuts, scratches and can be melted by cigarette heat.	Wash with mild soap and water. Remove stains with scouring powder and fine steel wool or diluted chlorine bleach. Use protector pads for hot pans.
Steel— Stainless	Excellent durability. Hard, smooth, non-absorbent and heat-proof. Resists burning cigarettes. Will not break, chip or crack. Easily cleaned.	Noisy work surface. Shows scratches, cuts, abrasion, water and finger marks. Acid and cleaning supplies affect color. Glares. Will conduct electricity. Feels cold. Neutral color. High initial cost.	Wash with mild soap and water. Rub with dry cloth to polish. Remove scratches with very fine steel wool and rub parallel to polish lines. Stains can be removed with alcohol or metal polish.
Tile— Ceramic	Provides a durable, smooth, hard, heat-proof surface. Easily cleaned except indented grooves between the tile. Resistant to heat, acids, stains and fading. Resistant to cuts and mild abrasion. Many colors, patterns and sizes available.	Rigid and noisy. Damages breakable objects if dropped on it. Dulls knives. Unglazed tile may be susceptible to stains; grout will stain. Indented grooves make cleaning difficult. High initial cost. Some glare.	Wash with mild soap and water using a soft cloth. Use commercial tile cleaner to remove stains.
Wood	Excellent cutting surface. When well-seasoned has a hard smooth surface. Easily refinished. Resistant to cuts and scratches. Only slight indentations under heavy impact. Hard maple is best. Natural color.	Durability and appearance depend upon the seal, finish and care given. If finished, frequent renewal is needed. If unfinished, must scrub and sand to keep clean. Shows scorching. Cigarettes burn it; abrasive materials roughen it. Slight color change.	Wipe with damp cloth using sudsy water if necessary. Remove scratches with fine sandpaper. Bleach with a solution of peroxide with a drop of ammonia. Surface can be maintained with hot mineral oil; leave overnight and wipe off excess.